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ABSTRACT

Australia's new national vocational education and training (VET) research and evaluation (R&E) strategy is underpinned by the goal of improving the VET systems and must accommodate the needs of all the different stakeholders in the VET sector. It focuses on research applied in nature, consolidating and advancing knowledge, and on evaluation work directed at the judgment of merit. The following key priority areas have been identified for the national R&E strategy: economic and social implications of VET; employment and the workforce; pathways from school to work; outcomes of the VET sector; the quality of provision of VET; and future issues affecting the VET sector. To make the national R&E program more useful, each project or activity funded through the strategy is designed to have a utilization plan that would be developed as part of the project brief. The range of dissemination methods available to the strategy is as follows: reports; journal articles in refereed or nonrefereed journals and books; articles; workshops, conferences, roadshows, and briefings; databases; networks of stakeholder or interest groups; existing and new publications; better use of technology, including the World Wide Web; and establishment and maintenance of a VET sector hotline. The national strategy involves the following: a series of priority studies; a program of leading edge or visionary research; consolidation and short-term studies; awards, scholarships, fellowships, and networks of VET researchers; and an annual work plan. (The National Strategy for VET 1998-2003 is appended.) (YLB)

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The national research and evaluation strategy for vocational education and training in Australia 1997–2000

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Preface

In 1996 the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Board recognised the need for a more integrated research effort, that would focus on providing advice to the wide range of stakeholders with an interest in the VET sector. As a result, the National Research and Evaluation Committee (NREC) was formed, as a sub-committee of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) Board, to ensure a more focussed approach to the national research and evaluation strategy.

The new arrangements provide the opportunity to develop an integrated national VET research and evaluation strategy, governing both ANTA's national research and evaluation activities and NCVER's own in-house national research program.

NREC's terms of reference are to:

- provide advice on national priorities for research and evaluation in VET, as the basis of a strategic plan for research and evaluation
- oversee the implementation of national priorities in research and evaluation within the budget and work program both of NCVER and ANTA
- provide advice to NCVER on the allocation of funds, in line with an identified work program for research and evaluation
- assist NCVER in, and provide advice to ANTA on, the promotion and dissemination of research and evaluation within the national VET systems.

NREC requested that NCVER prepare a consultation paper which identified various approaches and options for developing a national strategy. The consultation paper was circulated widely and has been the focus for consultations and written submissions from a wide range of individuals and groups in all States and Territories. Those consulted comprised a representative cross-section of the key groups who make up the audiences for research and evaluation activities in VET. In addition a series of research stocktakes were undertaken, which have also helped to shape the strategy.

The national research and evaluation strategy consolidates the advice provided through both the consultation process and the stocktakes of existing research. A key component of the strategy is assuring that the best use is made of the research and evaluation outcomes. This strategy will be monitored over the next three years.

Peter Kirby
Chairperson, National Research and Evaluation Committee

1 Introduction

Major changes have occurred in the vocational education and training (VET) sector in recent years which have not been subject to systematic research and evaluation. Decisions about the future of the VET sector need to be firmly grounded in independent investigations and analyses of what has happened and is happening in Australia and overseas.

A number of recent developments have led to a reconsideration of how best to develop our approach to national VET research and evaluation over the next few years. These include:

- a heightened concern about the need to review, evaluate and measure achievements of the VET sector in the context of the general debate about the performance of Australia's education and training systems
- a growing realisation that, despite all the increase in VET research and evaluation activity, it has not been easy to apply the results to improve decision-making with respect to VET planning, policy, benchmarking, priorities and resource use

The new structure for research and evaluation presented in this strategy is underpinned by the goal of improving Australia's vocational education and training systems.

The strategy must accommodate the needs of different stakeholders in the VET sector. These stakeholders and their needs include:

- **Policymakers and planners** who need quality research and evaluation work to underpin policy formation and planning and to evaluate the level of success of policy and planning decisions.
- **Training authorities,** so they can make better decisions about the overall provision of training.
- **Industry, employer and employee bodies** who require research and evaluation results in order to better advise government, individual employers and employees on the spectrum of vocational education's policies and practices.
- **Employers,** so they can make better decisions about what forms of training can improve the effectiveness of their businesses or organisations.
- **Education and training providers**, those in the public and private sectors, in the community, and in universities and schools, who need to make better decisions on what vocational education and training programs to offer and how to improve their teaching and learning practices.
- **Teachers and trainers**, no matter what type of provider they work for, who need better information about good practice and current developments to help them to improve the quality of teaching and learning experiences they design and deliver.
- **Students, apprentices and trainees**, who can make better decisions about their own skill formation if they have high-quality information about what training is available and what its outcomes are.
- **Researchers** who need access to current and completed research in order to undertake work which can help to improve the quality of the vocational education and training sector.

2 The scope and coverage of the national strategy

2.1 Research and evaluation

Research involves investigations which contribute to knowledge, in this case our knowledge about vocational education and training. The national strategy will focus on research which is applied in nature, which looks beyond specific contexts to produce outcomes and which has applications to both policy and practice. The strategy will also give prominence to research which consolidates the findings of a number of studies and produces products which advise both policymakers and practitioners. Research in this strategy therefore involves both consolidating and advancing knowledge.

Evaluation work will focus on the judgement of merit—for example, judging the merit of a policy, a program, a training module etc. Evaluation is concerned with the appropriateness, efficiency or effectiveness of some aspect of vocational education and training. The evaluation process may be used to guide the development of policies, programs or practices in a formative sense or, alternatively, to help make decisions for accountability purposes—including whether or not a policy, program or practice should be continued.

Research and evaluation activities that involve specific local or State-based VET programs or initiatives with their own internal program objectives will be largely the responsibility of the agency administering such programs or initiatives. Assessment of their broader implications may, however, form part of the work carried out under this strategy when there are clear national implications.

Research and evaluation work in this strategy will be directed at the broader aspects of programs and initiatives as well as at activities that can impact on national policies and decisions for improving the quality of VET in Australia.

2.2 The VET sector

The consultations revealed that it is often difficult to determine precisely where either the intersectoral or the national–State boundaries of vocational education and training lie. VET encompasses all the educational and training experiences that provide individuals with the competencies required in employment. However, it is recognised that linkages to employment are not the exclusive property of VET; for example, many higher education programs involve vocational preparation. General education can also be linked to employment requirements, albeit, usually in a less direct way. Furthermore, while VET linkages to employment are obvious when examples such as apprenticeships and post-trade training are considered, many VET programs are embarked upon with no more than the prospect of obtaining employment.

In dealing with this complex mix, the strategy will mainly focus on vocational education and training that is formally recognised under the requirements of the Australian Recognition Framework (ARF) and funded either publicly or by employers or individuals.

Most vocational education and training in Australia is provided by TAFE institutes but there are other providers, for example:

- private commercial providers specialising in VET
- adult community education centres
- higher education institutions
- industry-based training centres and individual company training centres
- secondary schools

Given that the coverage of VET research and evaluation work will sometimes overlap with other sectors, it needs to be acknowledged that the national strategy will be flexible and recognise that co-operative approaches will be the most suitable way of establishing an appropriate national program.

3 Elements of the strategy

3.1 Principles underpinning the strategy

Inputs received during the consultation process made it clear that the strategy needed to incorporate a number of important features within its design, namely that it:

- identifies a limited number of key priority funding areas and focusses on developing a program of research and evaluation which is comprehensive rather than one which is broad but lacking in depth
- balances the need for forward-looking research with research and evaluation which meets the immediate and short-term needs of various stakeholders
- encourages those working in the VET sector to engage in research and evaluation activities in order to ensure that the benefits of the skills gained accumulate within the sector
- captures the range of the VET sector's research and evaluation work and the statistical data collected through the National Advisory Committee on Vocational Education and Training Statistics (NACVETS) in order that research efforts are better co-ordinated and duplication is avoided
- develops co-ordinated, collaborative and responsive networks of researchers, evaluators and other stakeholders so that research and evaluation involves the most appropriate individuals and groups in the process
- encourages and builds a constructive but critical research and evaluation culture in order to enhance the contribution of research and evaluation to policy and practice in the VET sector
- ensures that the results of research and evaluation studies are disseminated widely and in forms which maximise their use in advising policy and practice.

3.2 The priorities of the national research and evaluation strategy for VET

Six key priority areas have been identified for the national research and evaluation strategy, namely:

- Economic and social implications of vocational education and training
- Employment and the workforce
- Pathways from school to work
- Outcomes of the vocational education and training sector
- The quality of provision of vocational education and training
- Future issues affecting the VET sector.

These priorities have been developed:

- through a process of consultations with policymakers; Commonwealth, State and Territory training authorities and a cross-section of representatives of business employers, unions, TAFE and other VET providers and the research community

- taking account of the results of stocktakes of recent VET research in Australia, namely:
  - Entry-level training
  - Learning in the workplace
  - Public and private provision of training
  - Flexible delivery of VET
  - Assessor training programs
  - VET and schools
  - Returns to enterprises from investment in VET
  - Quality assurance in VET
  - Competition and market reform in the Australian VET sector
  - VET and small business
  - Access and equity issues
  - Evaluation studies in VET
- taking account of the *National strategy for VET 1998–2003*, which is being developed through consultations with States, Territories, industry and community groups and whose four key objectives have been endorsed by ministers responsible for training, namely:
  - equipping Australians for the world of work
  - enhancing mobility in the labour market
  - achieving equitable outcomes in VET
  - maximising the value of public VET expenditure

The national VET research and evaluation strategy will be oriented towards research and evaluation that can contribute to assessing the progress being made to address the issues which are dealt with by the *National strategy for VET 1998–2003*. These issues are outlined in the appendix.

Economic and social implications of vocational education and training

Investment in vocational education and training is a critical economic issue. Investment is essential from the viewpoint of improving Australia's global competitiveness. It also represents significant expenditure in both the public and private components of the VET sector by governments, employers and individuals. More research is needed to quantify the benefits gained from vocational education and training, including returns on investment, so that better strategies can be developed to promote the benefits amongst employers, employees, young people and other prospective students, and to the community generally.

In particular a major focus is needed on:

- the education and training strategies of particular enterprises so that more information about how these add to the bottom line for business can be compiled and disseminated widely
- the patterns of investment in vocational education and training by small business and identifying improvements needed in this area

- the returns to individual investment in education and training, in terms of identifying the range of benefits attained, such as improved job prospects, greater job security, higher mobility and increased income
- research that can contribute to a greater understanding by the community in general about the economic and social importance of Australia's vocational education and training effort, particularly in terms of its importance to our economic future
- how the participation in VET of groups such as:
  - early school leavers
  - indigenous people
  - women
  - people from rural/non-metropolitan areas
  - people whose first language is not English
  - people with disabilities

  has changed over time and what factors drive these changes
- the involvement of the adult community education sector in VET and determining what factors drive this involvement.

The development of the training market in Australia is a critical issue for improving the system's responsiveness and effectiveness in meeting the vocational education and training needs of enterprises, different groups of Australians and the nation as a whole. However, too little is currently known about the real benefits and costs of a more market-oriented approach. The national VET research and evaluation strategy must include a program of research aimed at improving our understanding of the workings of training markets and take account of the impact of market forces on bodies such as TAFE institutes, private commercial training providers and adult community education centres.

Employment and the workforce

The national strategy should be focussed on examining how well Australia's vocational education and training system is meeting the changing needs of business. Economic and social change globally is resulting in ongoing major structural change in Australia's economy and the VET system faces considerable difficulties in keeping up with these changes. The national VET research and evaluation strategy needs particularly to address:

- how successfully training market approaches have achieved the aims of efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness
- changes in the structure of the workforce and the degree to which the provision of vocational education and training has adapted to these shifts through analyses of the demand and supply of the labour market and the training market, with particular emphasis on examining
  - industry and occupational shifts and the response of training providers to these shifts
  - the 'globalisation' of the economy
  - strategies for alleviating skill shortages

  - the changing nature of work, including the casualisation of employment and its impact on the learning needs of people
- examination of future workforce requirements and the development of strategies to ensure vocational education and training responses are put into place to meet likely future needs
- what amount of training is enterprise-specific as opposed to national and what consequences this has
- how the barriers to investment in training by small business can be overcome.

Pathways from school to work

The national strategy should incorporate a program of research and evaluation that more systematically analyses the pathways young Australians take in the transition from school to work, with a view to developing better arrangements to facilitate the transition. Some key issues requiring more investigation and analysis are:

- the patterns of participation by young Australians in education, training and work and the implications of this for developing better pathways to facilitate the effective transition into the workforce
- the uptake of apprenticeships and traineeships with particular emphasis on
  - the factors that increase the opportunities made available to young people by employers
  - barriers to the provision of high quality, entry-level training in Australia
  - implications for reform of apprenticeship and traineeship arrangements and the development of new arrangements to serve Australia's needs into the twenty-first century
  - examining how young people and their families make choices about entry-level training, with a view to developing better strategies to provide relevant and appropriate entry-level training arrangements in Australia
- the identification of good practice in the delivery of entry-level training, with a view to disseminating information to training providers, practitioners and prospective trainees so they can make more effective decisions about the provision, delivery and uptake of training
- how effective apprenticeship and traineeship arrangements are in meeting the needs of different groups of young Australians such as
  - early school leavers
  - indigenous young people
  - young females
  - rural/non-metropolitan youth and other young people in economically depressed localities
  - young people whose first language is not English
  - young people with disabilities
- what the impact of the generic competencies has been on
  - factors that affect the employability of young people
  - secondary school courses and performance
  - entry-level VET training and performance

Outcomes of the vocational education and training sector

There is still not an adequate research base to enable the main types of VET activity to be linked to the skills outcomes achieved (including where qualifications are obtained) and the subsequent employment and income outcomes derived from VET participation. Further work on these issues will be essential to properly demonstrate the value that is added by the almost $3 billion of public expenditure in the VET sector, together with that contributed by employers and individual employees. In particular the issues that need further investigation are:

- the outcomes being achieved by different groups of trainees/students, with a view to the development of strategies to improve the success rates from training undertaken by
  - early school leavers
  - indigenous people
  - female trainees/students
  - people from rural/non-metropolitan areas
  - people whose first language is not English
  - people with disabilities.
- the identification of any differences in outcomes associated with different modes of delivery (i.e. workplace training, classroom training, new technologies, group training, etc.)
- quantification of non-completion, withdrawal or failure rates and the identification of strategies to improve VET success rates
- the value added being delivered by the VET system in terms of what additional skills/qualifications people attained from their VET participation
- evaluation of the contribution that competency-based training and assessment has made to VET
- how well do VET outcomes relate to the principles of lifelong learning.

The quality of provision of vocational education and training

The national strategy needs to draw together a wide variety of research and evaluation work that can contribute to improving the quality of vocational education and training in Australia. In particular there is a requirement to identify VET provision which delivers equitable outcomes to all groups of Australians. The strategy will encompass investigation of:

- good practice and benchmarking of different teaching and learning approaches so that more flexibility and effective modes of VET delivery can be developed
- the effects of different modes of VET delivery, including workplace and classroom delivery and new technologies
- the assessment of competency-based training in Australia, with a view to developing strategies to address perceived problems with CBT
- a comprehensive examination of different learning styles and pedagogies with particular emphasis on developing more effective training strategies to meet the different needs of different groups of Australians such as indigenous Australians, people from ethnic backgrounds and educationally disadvantaged students

- the identification of the staff development requirements for improved quality of teaching and training.

Future issues affecting the VET sector

In addition to a program of research and evaluation that investigates current patterns, trends and arrangements, and that assesses and evaluates the impact of different VET initiatives, a comprehensive strategy should also include work aimed at helping Australia's VET system to position itself to meet future challenges. Research needs to be more influential in setting future directions for the development of our VET system into the twenty-first century. The use of 'think tanks' made up of an appropriate mix of specialists will be useful in dealing with some of these issues. Examples include:

- an investigation of how VET is changing and what future trends can be predicted
- examining approaches for determining what research will influence VET policy in the Year 2000 and beyond
- undertaking research into the training needs arising from emerging industries and technologies and establishing what implications these have for VET
- a longitudinal study of the efficiency objectives of VET.

3.3 Making effective use of the research and evaluation

In the past the outcomes of research and evaluation projects have often not been readily available to policymakers, practitioners and other important stakeholder groups in forms which were useful to them.

Stakeholders in the VET sector are identified in the introduction to this strategy. The consultation process showed that stakeholders believed that a variety of dissemination strategies are needed to maximise the use of the research and evaluation funded through the national strategy to ensure that timely advice is available. Such processes will ensure that the outcomes of the strategy satisfy the needs of the various VET audiences and will lead to an improvement in the quality of decision making at all levels.

The outcomes of the work funded through the national strategy will be produced and disseminated in a variety of ways, and use a variety of media. However, the ways that information is made available and the media used, depend to a substantial degree on the needs of the stakeholders concerned. The needs of stakeholders in the VET sector vary greatly.

As part of making the national research and evaluation program more useful, each project or activity funded through the strategy will therefore have a **utilisation plan** which will be developed as part of the project brief. The utilisation plan will document the key stakeholders at which the research or evaluation is targetted and propose a range of dissemination approaches appropriate to the needs of the stakeholders. The utilisation plan will be kept under review during the project and adjusted if necessary to reflect emerging needs.

The range of dissemination methods available to the strategy are:

- publishing research reports and monographs
- publishing journal articles (both electronic and paper-based, such as the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research*) and books
- publishing articles in magazines such as the *Australian Training Review*. In addition the dissemination approach will involve submitting information in suitable forms for use in newsletters and other dissemination approaches used by stakeholder groups themselves
- running face-to-face activities such as workshops, conferences, research 'roadshows' on particular issues, and briefings to selected stakeholders
- utilising databases (for example summaries of research on the VOCED database)
- developing and maintaining networks of stakeholders and interest groups
- using existing NCVER series publications and developing further publications to meet the needs of particular 'markets', for example, developing research briefing papers, implementing an ongoing stocktaking program
- making improved use of technology (including regular facsimiles to key stakeholders, teleconferences, video conferences, television broadcasts—in particular using television systems operated by the VET sector, audiotapes, audio broadcasts and videos)
- using the WorldWideWeb (in particular the NCVER and EdNA sites) to provide information to stakeholders and to promote information exchange, debate and input to databases, research processes and strategy development
- establishing and maintaining a VET sector research and evaluation 'hotline'. This will be both telephone and Web-based.

More specific details about these dissemination approaches are outlined below.

Reports of the research undertaken are, by tradition, produced and disseminated to stakeholders and others interested in the outcomes of the research. Often these reports are quite substantial and address topics of interest to a variety of stakeholders. These may be followed by articles in academic journals. Such reports are of primary interest to researchers, those commissioning the work and those who are directly affected by the report's findings. In the national strategy such reports remain a key underpinning information resource for stakeholders. In most cases, however, such reports will not be the major dissemination process used. Shorter, summary reports, targetted at key stakeholder groups will be produced and disseminated. Reports will therefore be printed and distributed on an as-needs, on-demand basis.

Journal articles in refereed or non-refereed journals and books are important to researchers, particularly those based within the university sector. They are of primary interest to this stakeholder group, but will not represent a key dissemination mechanism for this strategy, primarily because of the inevitable time delay between their submission and acceptance by a journal or publisher. While, therefore, not directly encouraged by the strategy, they nevertheless represent an important underpinning information base which will be drawn on, particularly in consolidating the research undertaken on particular topics. However the mechanisms and processes

used in the management of this strategy will not be applied in ways which discourage or actively prevent publication of research findings in these media.

Articles in magazines and newsletters are an appropriate dissemination device. This approach requires that a listing of suitable publications and their editors be developed and maintained and copy produced which is specifically targetted to their audience and needs. Such newsletters or magazines may be published by a range of organisations, including national agencies, State/Territory training authorities, ITABs, industry and other associations, unions and individual providers.

Workshops, conferences, 'roadshows' and briefings would be of interest to a wide range of stakeholders. However, workshops would predominantly be of interest to practitioners, students, apprentices and trainees, while conferences have a potentially broader appeal. 'Roadshows' and briefings would be targetted on particular priority areas or issues. 'Roadshows' would be of interest to a broad spectrum of interest groups, including researchers, policymakers, planners, training authorities, providers and practitioners and would be interactive, occupying from two hours to one day. Briefings, on the other hand, would be focussed on specific key issues. Those briefed would include federal and State ministers, ANTA CEOs, training authorities and key national and State/Territory-based associations, committees, councils, boards or other representative groups. Such briefings might be face-to-face or use videoconferencing facilities and/or be based upon short highly-focussed papers drawing out the policy implications of different areas of research.

Databases—specifically the VOCED database, are used to maintain listings of current and completed research and evaluation work. Brief abstracts, keyword searching facilities and other features enhance their value as dissemination devices to a wide variety of audiences. They are, however, of particular use to researchers. Ensuring that they comprehensively capture and document the research and evaluation conducted in relation to the VET sector is an important component of this strategy

Networks of stakeholder or interest groups will be used to disseminate results. The groups themselves will be made up of individuals in a particular category (for example CEOs of VET providers) or be drawn from a broad range of stakeholder groups, all of whom are interested in a particular topic or issue. Such groups will be used both in dissemination and as a research resource.

Existing and new publications published under the auspices of NCVER will contribute to the dissemination process. For example:

Getting to grips with . . . are useful publications for practitioners, students and trainees, industry bodies, employers, unions, providers and other groups in dealing with particular topics or issues arising from the research and evaluation strategy. They may also be used to provide information for a range of groups on key policy areas and structural arrangements within the sector.

Review of research . . . is useful for a range of audiences including policymakers, planners, training authorities, researchers and practitioners and fulfils a role similar to that of the stocktakes commissioned through the national research and evaluation strategy. They consolidate and review the research findings from a range of studies and can be used both to provide research advice to a variety of stakeholder groups and identify issues needing research.

The policy discussion paper series is of particular use to policymakers, training authorities, providers, industry, employer and employee bodies.

In addition a range of other publications will be developed, including short (2–4 page) briefing papers, targetted at the needs of specific groups and disseminated using mailouts, email and facsimile transmissions. These will be targetted at specific individuals or organisations or groups drawn from appropriate databases of the stakeholder groups. They will be developed using research reports as a basis and will be commissioned as part of a project brief. (Alternatively they could be produced by writers with the specific writing skills required.)

Using technology better, including the WorldWideWeb (WWW) will provide important mechanisms for disseminating information and fostering networks and dialogue. The national research and evaluation strategy will have a stand-alone presence on NCVER's Web site. Links are being established with the university centres with an interest in VET sector research. Progressively other stakeholder groups will be linked or can have access to this Website. The VOCED database will also be available on the WWW to enhance opportunities to extract details of current or completed research and evaluation, or to input new information.

Other technologies outlined above will be used, when appropriate, to assist in the dissemination process. For example, some face-to-face briefing meetings will be recorded on video and audiotape and these recordings used for dissemination purposes.

Establishing and maintaining a VET sector 'hotline' represents a mechanism by which stakeholder groups and researchers will be able to investigate the research and evaluation work being conducted or completed in a range of areas and gain access to advice in their specific area of interest. This would be of particular interest to policymakers and representatives of industry, employer and employee bodies. Nevertheless, it would be of interest to other key stakeholder groups as well.

This section of the strategy has attempted to capture and document the great potential of better dissemination and utilisation of research and evaluation findings for the VET sector. The strategy will involve a progressive process of designing, trialling, implementing and reviewing a comprehensive range of dissemination approaches aimed at significantly improving the takeup and use of the research and evaluation projects and activities funded both through the strategy and other sources.

3.4 Mechanisms for achieving the priorities

Experience in recent years has seen the demand for funds to support national VET research and evaluation projects far exceeding the resources that are available. There is every indication that this situation is likely to continue over the next three years so the funds available to the national strategy must be distributed in ways that ensure the maximum impact and value for money possible.

In November 1996 ANTA signed an agreement with NCVER to manage the national research and evaluation strategy on its behalf. NREC was established as a sub-committee of the Board of NCVER. Its role is to oversight the work of NCVER as

managing agent for the research and evaluation funded under this strategy. The Committee's terms of reference are given in the preface to this strategy.

NCVER has established a co-ordination branch whose role is to provide secretarial and executive support to the Committee. The branch also has responsibility for the continued management of research contracts funded prior to 1997, management of the projects and other activities funded under this strategy and the appropriate dissemination of the outcomes of the research and evaluation work undertaken.

To achieve the 1997–98 research and evaluation priorities, the strategy has a budget of up to $2.4 m from ANTA's national program funds for VET research and evaluation and from NCVER's own core grant research program. These funds will contribute to addressing the priorities identified by this strategy. The strategy will also encompass studies that analyse and interpret VET statistics and survey results and identify trends in VET in Australia. In addition ANTA separately funds four research centres whose work program is agreed to by ANTA, but which is advised by this strategy. These centres are:

- Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (Monash University and ACER)
- Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training (University of Technology, Sydney)
- Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (University of Tasmania)
- Centre for Vocational Assessment Research (NSW Vocational Education and Assessment Centre and The University of Melbourne Assessment Research Centre).

The priorities will be achieved through a managed but flexible program of project funding which:

- enables project funds to be let progressively throughout the year
- allows joint funding of projects with other interested parties, but which does not compromise the integrity of the project or the strategy's ability to disseminate the findings of such research and evaluation projects in appropriate ways to key stakeholder groups
- incorporates the full variety of funding options, including those which are commissioned, or let through limited or open tender.
- allows for the possibility of recurrent project funding, in particular to support longitudinal studies.

The structure of the program will be based around a series of **priority studies** based on a relatively small number of key priority areas (see section 3.2) which were identified using an approach which is broadly similar to that outlined below for reviewing this strategy (see section 3.5). Themes under each of the priorities will enable particular aspects of the priority area to be explored through appropriate and more targetted evaluation or research studies.

In this case the process will involve:

- the development of a suitable project brief, including a utilisation plan

- calls for short expressions of interest by potential research bodies or consortia, against carefully detailed selection criteria related to the brief
- shortlisting based on the selection criteria
- the development of a detailed proposal by those shortlisted, which includes the encouragement of appropriate collaborative proposals
- selection of successful tenderers
- preparation of a suitable letter of agreement and contract with the successful proponent, including their role in the dissemination process.

The research will then be managed within the terms of the letter of agreement and contract by the NREC Co-ordination Branch, based at NCVER.

This process will aim to be as transparent as possible. Clear guidelines will be developed to assist those tendering for work funded under this component of the strategy.

The project processes and outcomes will be monitored. Suitability of the outcomes and outputs of the project will be determined using agreed contractual arrangements and review processes.

The aim will be to ensure an open and competitive process, where bidders are not required to develop detailed and resource-intensive research proposals unless they are through to the final shortlisting stage.

There will also be a program of **leading edge** or **visionary research**. Funds in this component of the strategy will not necessarily be tied to the priorities, and may be derived from proposals submitted by project proponents.

This component would be developed using less extensive guidelines and be aimed at encouraging researchers and consortia to identify important and emerging issues and priority areas and building a body of research evidence which is available to policymakers and practitioners alike.

In this case the process will be similar to that outlined above, although it may lack the specific directions required of the priority studies component. However, for the most part, budgets for individual projects should be relatively small (that is, under $50 000).

In addition, **consolidation and short-term studies** will be funded. The consolidation studies are similar to the stocktakes used to inform this strategy. The short-term studies will enable the strategy to respond quickly to requests for immediate research and evaluation information from the Ministerial Council (MINCO). These studies will usually be small projects undertaken in a relatively short timeframe. Accordingly, they may be commissioned or let through limited tender. However such studies may be incorporated as components of other, larger, research projects funded by the strategy, or used as a precursor to advise the approach to be used in, and the scope of, projects in the priority study program. As such their products may include a consolidation and review of existing research, advice to ministers, or developing a suitable project brief for subsequent funding.

Finally a small component of the funds will be set aside to support a series of **awards, scholarships, fellowships and networks of VET researchers** which may be used to:

- support travel to, from or within Australia of visiting expert fellows from within Australia or from overseas who are able to add value to research and debate related to the key priority areas or visionary research supported by the national strategy
- contribute to fellowships for VET sector personnel to undertake a program of work and study overseas of value to the VET sector and of relevance to the national strategy (for example, Winston Churchill Memorial Trust fellowships)
- provide scholarships to enable VET sector employees to further their studies at a higher education institution by undertaking a research or evaluation project which addresses an aspect of the key priorities identified in the national strategy
- support the development of networks of researchers with interests in the VET sector in Australia. (In particular the development and work of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association will be supported through this strategy.)

The balance between these various components will be established using an annual work plan which is developed and monitored by the Co-ordination Branch based at NCVER. However, as a broad guideline, the majority of the funds will be spent in funding research in the key priority areas and in dissemination. About $50 000 will be spent on supporting a program of awards, scholarships, fellowships and sponsoring both research networks and the development of the research community in the VET sector. The plan will be reviewed at each meeting of the Committee to enable it to be adjusted appropriately to meet emerging priorities and to reflect the outcomes of research and evaluation work already undertaken.

The national strategy also needs to be underpinned by appropriate sources of information on:

- research and evaluation funding sources
- research bodies and their research interests
- current and recently completed research work of relevance to the VET sector.

Accordingly the national research and evaluation strategy will aim to support by appropriate means:

- the establishment and maintenance of a series of networks, interest and discussion groups in a range of areas relevant to the needs of the VET sector and including researchers, evaluators, policymakers, practitioners and industry groups at the local, State/Territory, national and international levels
- the development and maintenance of a register of research and evaluation funding sources with interests in the VET sector
- the establishment and maintenance of a register of organisations and individuals with interests and particular expertise in VET sector research and evaluation
- the use of the VOCED database as a focal point to capture and document current and completed research of relevance to the VET sector from all available sources of funding. Improved access to this database will be encouraged by making it more accessible to users, including through the WorldWideWeb. This will enable

research and evaluation projects to be lodged and incorporated on the database more readily.

Responsibility for oversighting the implementation of the national VET research and evaluation strategy rests with NREC on behalf of the NCVER Board. In addition to the processes described above, it is proposed that a range of key networks be formed. The networks will be structured around three focal areas which will draw together individuals representative of the various interest groups within the focal areas. These networks will include:

- **business networks** drawn not only from employer representative bodies but particularly from individual employers, including small business
- **training provider networks** representative of the public and private training providers and their management, as well as teachers and trainers within the providers and in industry
- **client networks,** including students, trainees and apprentices, together with those representing a range of important but more specific interest groups—for example, women, indigenous people, people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, people from rural areas, people with disabilities or those from areas of chronic long-term unemployment.

For the most part these groups will be formed on an ad hoc basis. They will provide advice to help improve the impact of the research strategy within their stakeholder groups, the types of dissemination approaches needed and the utility of the information being provided to decision-making bodies through the research and evaluation program funded by the strategy.

3.5 Reviewing the strategy

It is important the two key aspects of the national strategy be reviewed. These aspects are:

- the priorities on which the national research and evaluation program is based, and
- the effectiveness of the outputs and outcomes of the program to ensure that the research and evaluation projects and activities funded through the strategy are effectively utilised by stakeholders.

The research and evaluation priorities will be reviewed by an extensive and ongoing process of consultation with a full range of stakeholders. This will help to ensure ownership of the research and evaluation themes and help to foster a culture within the sector which increasingly values the research and evaluation as a means of advising policy and practice. The processes will include:

- using priorities advised by the national strategic directions for vocational education and training determined by consolidating information sourced from MINCO, the ANTA CEOs, ANTA and DEETYA
- undertaking ongoing dialogue with State and Territory agencies, research centres and individual researchers concerned with adult vocational education and training, industry bodies, individual employers, unions, providers, practitioners, students, apprentices and trainees, and other VET sector clients and interest groups

- inviting briefings to NREC by representatives of specific stakeholder groups
- receiving submissions from individuals or groups to NREC regarding the priorities outlined in this strategy
- continuing the stocktaking of existing research and evaluation work both in Australia and overseas to provide a basis for identifying current and future priority areas, and advising of gaps in the research effort
- establishing 'think tanks' in a range of key areas, which are specifically designed to provide visionary advice on current or future policy directions and practices.

It should be noted that the first of the processes—relating to the national strategic directions for VET—is still under consideration by peak groups, including MINCO. Accordingly the priorities identified in this strategy will be kept under review for the remainder of 1997, with a more definitive statement of priorities to be made in the latter months of the year. The ongoing consultation process with key stakeholders will enable the priorities to be adjusted and balanced over the next three years. A flexible approach is needed.

Through these processes a range of advice will be available from both inside and outside the sector to ensure that the strategy is meeting both the immediate and longer-term research and evaluation needs of the sector.

In particular, industry, students and trainees must all be regarded as important participants in and clients of the VET sector. Accordingly their involvement in and commitment to the range of research and evaluation activities within the sector will be monitored as part of the ongoing review process.

Evaluating the outcomes of the national strategy in an ongoing way is important to ensure that it is meeting the needs of stakeholder groups and represents value for money. The agreement between ANTA and NCVER outlines a series of critical success factors and performance standards. Key areas for success are that:

- the priorities developed through the strategy reflect the needs of key stakeholders
- the strategic work program is developed and managed effectively
- research and evaluation findings are disseminated to key stakeholders in ways which maximise their currency and value.

The strategy needs to be reviewed at a variety of levels, including both the individual project and component levels (that is, the four major identifiable components of the overall strategy—the priority and visionary components, consolidation and short-term studies and awards, scholarships and fellowships). Most importantly the strategy needs to be reviewed not only to enable improvements to be made to the processes used to implement the strategy, but also to judge the effectiveness of the strategy overall.

The process will involve:

- a suitable project review system
- measurement against a set of agreed performance indicators

- retaining an external evaluation team to monitor/report to NREC on the outcomes and processes of the strategy over the next three years. (Particular emphasis will be given to this review process in the 1999 funding year to determine the extent to which the processes developed and used, and the outcomes achieved, have met contractual obligations and have achieved the desired objectives.)

The review process will therefore establish the extent to which key priorities were addressed, and timely and useful information was provided to stakeholders. This will enable judgements to be made about the effectiveness of the strategy in contributing to improvements in the capacity of the VET sector to deliver quality products and services to its various clients within a well-designed and appropriate policy framework.

Appendix

The National Strategy for VET 1998–2003

The first National Strategy, *Towards a Skilled Australia*, was released in 1994 for the years 1994–1997. While the Strategy still maintains general currency, the extent and pace of change within the Vocational Education and Training system in recent years, means it is beneficial to redevelop the Strategy for the period 1998 to 2003.

Ministers, at their meeting of 23 May 1997, endorsed four objectives for the National Strategy:

- *Equipping Australians for the World of Work*
- *Enhancing Mobility in the Labour Market*
- *Achieving Equitable Outcomes in VET*
- *Maximising the Value of Public VET Expenditure.*

The *National Strategy for VET 1998–2003* will represent agreement between States, Territories and the Commonwealth on how the key challenges for VET will be addressed over the next five years. The strategy will be developed through consultations with States and Territories and industry and community groups.

Ministers also identified a set of issues on which consultations should focus. Answers to the questions raised by these issues will be dealt with in the National Strategy either by setting targets or adopting development strategies. The issues are:

- *The purpose of VET:*
  Employment contracts and reforms to encourage modularisation of training to suit specific enterprises reflect the primary concerns of industry clients. Lifelong learning and the congruence of general education with vocational training are perceived by others as being more important. An appropriate balance between these two broad areas of VET activity requires discussion.
- *The development of a genuinely national system:*
  Industry groups have expressed the importance of a genuinely industry led national system in which all barriers and unwarranted differences in processes between States and Territories are removed. How industry expectations are met, at what rate and how industry leadership is to be effected, needs comment in the National Strategy.
- *Flexibility/responsiveness:*
  Whilst there is widespread support for increasing flexibility and responsiveness in the training system, levels of support for and the rate of introduction of market reforms varies amongst States and Territories. There are real costs and real industrial, structural and political barriers which constrain the rate of change in most systems.
- *A user friendly system:*
  The change from a time-based/qualifications based approach to competency based training, ensuring quality and national consistency and the frequency of change, each contribute greatly to the complexity of the system. While these changes are strongly supported, the VET system and its processes need to be kept simple so that its advantages can be explained to individuals, people in the workplace and enterprises.
- *Strengthening demand:*
  There is widespread agreement that reforms to VET should result in a sector which has the capacity to identify and anticipate, the needs of clients and respond to those needs in a dynamic way, with a minimum of bureaucratic process. Yet current resource allocation, planning and product development processes still operate to 'sift' demand signals from the end users of skills.
- *Balance of effort:*
  Publicly funded training has not shifted in line with industry workforce composition or demands for skill acquisition. There is a need for more accurate identification, industry by industry and State by State, of skill gaps and areas where increased effort is warranted. Similarly, different levels of VET effort—employment-based entry level training, opportunities in advanced skills for school leavers and updating workforce skills—have received different priority at different times over the last few years.
- *Quality:*
  In an open and competitive training market, competitive pressures could be the primary vehicle to drive improvements in standards and to ensure quality. Shared directions on quality will help clients access consistent quality outcomes from a national system.

The National Strategy for VET 1998–2003 (cont.)

- *Who pays for what?*
  The question of what training government should pay for has traditionally been left to providers and regulatory agencies. Differences between States and Territories have developed through different custom and practice. An approach to address the balance of public, employer and individual contribution to the cost of VET should recognise that the decisions of one State or Territory will impact on others.

- *User pays—individual and enterprise clients:*
  Related to the issue of 'Who pays for what?' is the question of user pays. There is a lack of consistency within and between systems in the setting of fees and charges for individuals. With an increased amount of vocational education and training being targeted to enterprise specific skills, the extent to which enterprises bear the cost becomes an issue.

- *Equitable outcomes:*
  Considerable national effort and expenditure has been invested over the past ten to fifteen years to increase the participation in VET of targeted population groups. In the emerging training market, where the purchaser buys outputs, a key question will be how to best purchase activity to produce equitable outcomes.

- *Efficiency:*
  It is likely that future growth from public sector funding of the VET sector will be derived in part from increased efficiencies achieved by States and Territories. Maximising value from the assets (educational, capital and human) in the systems will allow a broader range of client needs to be met in what is likely to be a period of some austerity.

- *VET product costs:*
  State and Territory training systems are moving at different rates towards being fully able to identify the cost of their training products and services. Unit costs principles are now available to guide States and Territories, but they are being applied variably. Effective market reforms cannot be fully introduced without better understanding and comparability of VET product costs.

- *Key performance measures:*
  Whilst it is accepted that performance measures based upon robust data are critical to driving performance improvements, agreement on what key performance measures might be and how they should be used within the sector cannot be achieved without due consideration of implications for current State or Territory performance management systems and practices.

- *Internationalisation:*
  Efforts towards internationalisation have focused, to date, on attracting fee paying overseas students. If Australia wishes to be seen as an active, quality player in what is fast becoming a global education and training market, there needs to be an effective approach to internationalisation which is much broader than this.

- *VET/intersectoral links:*
  The relationship between VET and other education sectors needs to be redefined to ensure that VET is a valid choice for school students seeking employment outcomes. Although VET has a strong base in industry training it remains a part of the broad education sector and its relationship to schools and universities needs clarification.

- *Separation of roles:*
  Public sector managers of VET within States and Territories are often responsible for both purchasing training from a range of providers (in the interests of clients) and managing TAFE system assets (in the interests of the government). There is a need to address how the potential conflict of interest between the roles can be reduced.

- *TAFE institutes:*
  In some States and Territories there is a disparity between the growing demands and market pressures facing TAFE institutes and the managerial powers which institutes have to respond to these pressures. Public ownership of TAFE institutes should not restrict their ability to operate as business units in a competitive training market. Industry clients would prefer to be able to negotiate training needs directly with local providers.

- *The development of a training culture:*
  Training has an important part to play in the development of a more competitive economy for Australia. The importance of this role is not matched by the value accorded to it by the community in general and industry in particular.

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd is Australia's primary research and development organisation.

NCVER works with federal and State governments and the Australian National Training Authority to provide essential statistics and information on vocational education and training in Australia.

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